

## **CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION**

The Charter Revision Commission met at the Wethersfield Town Manager's Conference Room on Thursday, April 3, 2014 at 6:30 pm.

Present: Chairperson Dan Silver, Vice Chairperson Steve Kirsche, T. William Knapp, Louis Laccavole, Mary Pelletier, John McAuliffe, Jr., and Mike Zaleski

Also Present: Commission Secretary Sónia Betz, Town Manager Jeff Bridges and Town Clerk Dolores Sassano. Robert Young of 20 Coppermill Rd. and Paul Copp of 100 Executive Sq. both arrived at approximately 6:50 pm.

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Silver at 6:30 pm.

Chairperson Silver indicated that he would not read the transcripts of the March 20th meeting, but invited discussion of them. Commissioner Knapp indicated an error on page 22 of the transcript in which a voice listed Willington as one of the four member towns that make up the Central Connecticut Health District. Commissioner Knapp stated that Willington is not one of towns, that they are Wethersfield, Rocky Hill, Berlin and Newington. He suggested that a correction be made to the transcript to replace Willington with Newington.

**Motion to accept the transcripts, as amended, was made by Commissioner McAuliffe and seconded by Vice Chairperson Kirsche. All those present voted AYE unanimously. 7-0-0**

The floor was the opened to public comment, as per the Agenda, however no members of the public were present at the time. Chairperson Silver expressed his surprise given the topics up for discussion and the fact that the agenda had been posted early to allow for ample notice.

Prior to beginning the discussion of the topics at hand, Chairperson Silver wanted to suggest a procedure to the Commission in how to move forward in the discussion of the issues. His suggestion was to open the discussion with any ideas, questions and other relevant information and then follow said discussion with a motion on the floor as to any amendment or additions. That issue would then be resolved. This would be to avoid continuously going back to previously discussed topics. Topics may be revisited in the future if further discussion is warranted. Commissioners agreed to this procedure. Chairperson Silver also announced that he appointed Commissioner Knapp as the spokesperson for the Commission. This is in case a commissioner has any questions or concerns between meetings so that there is only one Commissioner contacting the Town Manager or Town Clerk.

Topic Discussion:

a) Budget Referendum

- Chair person Silver opened up the table to discussion on the topic of a budget referendum. This an ongoing and controversial issue addressed by many speakers at the public hearing. Vice Chairperson Kirsche moved to not include any reference to a budget referendum, seconded by Commissioner Knapp. Chairperson Silver suggested that the motion was negative and moved that it was out of order as it was contrary to the established procedure. His intention was to have a general discussion on the topic, followed by any motions. If there is no interest in changing the Charter, then no motion has to be made indicating no change. Commissioner Knapp withdrew his second. The Commissioners then discussed the issue of the budget referendum at length.

- Key points: Commissioner Pelletier suggested a threshold that would trigger a referendum. Vice Chairperson Kirsche and Commissioner McAuliffe both rejected this stating this hinders progress and costs more money in the long run by putting off necessary repairs and/or upgrades in the interest of staying under the threshold. Commissioner Laccavole stated that a “No” vote doesn’t tell you why the people voted no, leading a trial and error of referendum after referendum. Chairperson Silver brought up the Charter Revision of 1994 where the question was brought up by petition, but failed at referendum. Chairperson Silver also referred to information provided by Town Manager Bridges that of the 169 towns in the State of Connecticut, 75 towns approved their budgets by referendum in the last three years. Unclear how many have a Council form of government or how many have a mandatory referendum. Chairperson Silver also cited low voter turnout in past referendums. Chairperson Silver indicated that referendums are expensive, and if they fail they must be repeated, at times leading to not having a budget in place by the July 1<sup>st</sup> date. Commissioner Zaleski expressed that he is comfortable with the opportunities that the people of Wethersfield have to get involved in the budget process through public hearings, budget hearings, elections, etc.
- **Vice Chairperson Kirsche made a motion to add a budget referendum feature to the Charter. Motion was seconded by Commissioner Pelletier. All those present voted. Motion failed. 0-6-1 (Abstention by Commissioner Pelletier)**

b) Term Limits for Members of the Town Council and Board of Education

- Chairperson Silver opened discussion by indicating there are currently no term limits. Members of the Town Council serve two-year terms, while members of the Board of Education serve staggered terms of either two or four years.
- Commissioner Knapp expressed his concern that one of the issues is finding people willing to volunteer.
- Chairperson Silver expressed his opinion that when it comes to difficult issues, such as the budget, it is beneficial to have experienced people who have a better understanding of the process.
- Commissioner Laccavole stated that it is becoming more difficult to find people to volunteer for anything and that regular elections are the best form of term limitation in that the People can vote someone out that they feel is ineffective.
- Commissioner McAuliffe stated that by limiting terms, you eventually end up with inexperienced and irresponsible people running the government.
- Chairperson Silver asked the commissioners if anyone wanted to make a motion to establish term limits for members of the Town Council and Board of Education. **No motion was made.**

c) Position of Mayor

- Chairperson Silver stated that the suggestion that came forth was to essentially change the current form of government to a strong mayor in lieu of a Town Manager and nine-member Town Council who are voted on each year.
- Commissioner McAuliffe disagrees with the idea on the basis of the potential lack of consistency along party lines. He also fears what happened in Hartford happening in Wethersfield.
- Vice Chairperson Kirsche stated that the current form of government provides an innate check and balance system because there are nine people making the decisions as opposed to that power resting on one person.

- Commissioner Zaleski supports the current form of government. He stated that his interpretation of the agenda item referred to one of the items proposed by the minority party as to how the mayor is selected. He wanted to ensure that that item, and other items proposed by the minority party would be addressed at some point. Chairperson Silver had plans to address the minority party and Town Manager proposals at a separate meeting, but indicated that this item could be addressed at this meeting.
- Commissioner Laccavole asked what the authority and responsibility the mayor in the current form of government has over and above that of the other Councilors.
  - Town Manager Bridges stated that they are essentially the Chairperson of the Town Council. He/she sets the agenda for the Council meetings, but has no decision-making powers. He/she is one vote of nine.
  - Commissioner Zaleski stated that he felt that responsibilities of the mayor are primarily ceremonial – ribbon cuttings, speeches, etc. He/she is perceived as the Chief Elected Official.
- Commissioner Laccavole asked whether the mayor is elected by the Council. This was affirmed by the other members. It was also clarified that the mayor is not necessarily the top vote-getter in the election.
- Vice Chairperson Kirsche expressed his disagreement with the minority party stating that the majority party should have the mayor, even if that person was not the top vote-getter.
- Commissioner Knapp asked whether the Commission had moved on from the issue of the strong mayor.
- Chairperson Silver stated that that issue had not yet been resolved and that they had gotten off track. He requested that they resolve that issue. He asked if there was a motion on the issue of a strong mayor. No motion was made.
- Commissioner Knapp then suggested that the question be phrased as “How do we elect the Mayor?”
- Chairperson Silver indicated that the question also includes the Board of Education, citing that in the current Board a member of the minority party was elected Chair.
- Commissioner McAuliffe stated that a Town Manager has a lot of knowledge of laws and other things that go into running a town and that by changing to a strong mayor we run the risk of getting someone inexperienced every time we have an election.
- Chairperson Silver stated his opinion that the system as we currently have it has worked and that what happened in the most recent election was a fluke.
- Commissioner Knapp asked for clarification that the highest vote-getter being selected as mayor by the majority was tradition.
- Chairperson Silver affirmed this, but stated that it is not always the case because the highest vote-getter is not always the party’s choice for the best candidate. And that if the public votes for a majority of a party, the mayor should be from that party as that is the agenda that the public selected.
- Commissioner Zaleski stated that it is not our business who the caucus chooses. It is tradition, and not addressed in the Charter.
- Commissioner Laccavole stated that changing the way the mayor or chairperson of the Board of Education is selected may discourage people from running for office because they may be afraid of getting the highest number of votes.
- Town Manager Bridges that although the mayor is the chair of the Town Council, he/she still has many calls, concerns, questions and demands put upon them by the public, as if they were the Chief Executive Officer and that the person should be willing and able to take that on.
- Chairperson Silver asked if anyone wanted to make a motion to change how the mayor is appointed. **No motion was made.**

Chairperson Silver decided to allow for a one-time exception to have public comments at the end of the meeting because the members of the public arrived late.

Chairperson Silver proposed that for the next meeting they get through the remainder of the public comments, being the recommendations of the Town Manager and the two parties. He will meet with Vice Chairperson Kirsche to determine how much time should be allotted to discuss them. Subsequent meetings will deal with going through the Charter. The next meeting will be in two weeks. Chairperson Silver will be away next week and requested that any questions be directed to Vice Chairperson Kirsche. He then opened the floor to public comments, reminding them that the meetings begin at 6:30 pm.

#### Public Comment

1. Robert Young, 20 Coppermill Rd.
  - a. Mr. Young began by discussing his thoughts on the term limits for the Council and Board of Education. He states that no term limits allows for the person to know their way around issues, and also encourages nepotism.
  - b. He also addressed his feelings on the budget referendum. He feels that low voter turnout shows that people are disenchanted and disengaged and that something needs to be done to bring people back. He stated that the budget needs to decrease and not to increase every year and it is up to the Commission to bring about that change with the referendum.
2. Paul Copp, 100 Executive Sq.
  - a. Mr. Copp expressed his views on the budget referendum as being something positive and a way for the public to express that they are happy with their government.
  - b. He then spoke on term limits saying that there should be a maximum to how long a person can serve. He said that there is too much "C.Y.A." being accomplished. If not a maximum, then perhaps an interruption in service.
  - c. As to the position of mayor, he states that he doesn't know anyone in town who can do the Town Manager's job.

Vice Chairperson Kirsche asked for the opportunity for the Commission to comment again. He would like the issue of term limits to be readdressed in a future meeting due to Mr. Young's concerns about nepotism. Commission Pelletier agreed.

Chairperson Silver stated that he wasn't aware of that ever happening.

Commissioner Knapp stated he was aware of some situations where the Town's attorney was consulted as to whether there was a conflict.

Chairperson Silver stated that this discussion was best served to be addressed at a future meeting and asked for a motion of adjournment.

**Commissioner Knapp moved for adjournment at 7:59 pm. Commissioner McAuliffe seconded. All those present voted AYE unanimously. 7-0-0**

Respectfully Submitted.

Sónia Betz, Secretary